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Memorial Sketch

of

William Eaton

By

Arthur Wentworth Hamilton Eaton

D.C.L.

New York
Privately Printed
1893

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Born September 30, 1823

Died May 3, 1893

Et audivi vocem de cœlo, dicentem mihi: Scribe: Beati mortui, qui in Domino moriuntur. Amodo, jam dicit Spiritus: ut requiescant a laboribus suis; opera enim illorum sequuntur illos.

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William Eaton

IN public and in private, so many respectful and tender tributes have been paid, since his death, to William Eaton, that it seems fitting that his own children, who knew him best, should say a few words concerning his character and life. His personality was one that should not be suffered to fade from the memory at least of any who were connected with him by ties of blood or close friendship; and so much, as it now appears, did he in his public official life endear himself to those associated with him, that no apology is offered for putting before them a little more careful account than has yet been given of our revered father. Such an estimate could scarcely have been made while he was alive, but now, alas! the change has come which sets every life in true perspective.

In 1760, five years after the tragical expulsion of the Acadian French, the founders of many of the county families of Nova Scotia, men of the best

New England stock, removed from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, or Connecticut, to the fertile Province of Nova Scotia, where they became owners of valuable tracts of land that before the expulsion had belonged to the Acadians. This land-ownership gave them the importance of large planters, not the least of their wealth lying in the rich dyke lands about the Basin of Minas and the tidal streams. In the beautiful "Evangeline Country," soon after erected into the County of Kings, many of these planters settled, founding the greater number of what have always been the leading families of the county, the Belchers, Chipmans, Cogswells, De Wolfs, Eatons, Harrises, Rands, Starrs, and Woodworths. The chief representative, in the county, of the Eaton family, in the last generation, was our grandfather, Ward Eaton, Esq., who married his first cousin, Deborah Eaton, both of them being grandchildren of the founders of the family in Nova Scotia, Mr. David Eaton, and his wife Deborah White. Of our grandparents no words of eulogy are too strong to be spoken. They were people of unusual dignity, high breeding, and superior sense. Their home in Cornwallis had about it the atmosphere of true refinement, and in their presence

rudeness or meanness could not stay. "The Squire," as Mr. Eaton was often simply called, was both loved and feared, for although no man was ever more generous and kindly than he, his convictions of justice were strong, and in his public life, and in all his judgments of men, he was quick to detect falsehood and wrong. He lived in the days, which seem far away now, of fierce strife in Nova Scotia between the old liberal and conservative parties—the "Howe and Johnston" times—and his political sympathies, as became a gentleman of the old school as he was, were strongly on the "Tory" side. Of our dear grandmother, no one who remembers her can ever speak except with deep respect and love. She was a woman of exalted qualities of mind and rare gifts of heart; and it is no disparagement to others to say that she was probably the most widely known and best loved woman of her time in the county. All her husband's hospitalities she warmly seconded, and many distinguished persons throughout the Province held her in high esteem.

By such parents William Eaton was reared, and as he grew up it was evident that he had inherited many of the qualities of both. To his father's strong, clear, discriminating mind, generous im-

pulses, and courteous manners, he joined his mother's gentleness, patience, and self-forgetfulness. Of all her six children he was, we think, the most like her, and the loving way in which she invariably spoke his name, gave us unconsciously the feeling that he was a little the nearest her heart.

The great fact concerning a man, as Carlyle has said, is his religion, and our father's nature was so deeply religious that in any estimate of him his religion should not be passed by. Of a family that for six generations before his parents, had been Puritan Congregationalists, his views were naturally Calvinistic, and all his life the present to him was simply a preparation time for better things beyond. He lived with a profound, personal sense of God, and died as he lived. But in his definite theological opinions, he was too much of a reader and too clear-minded not to feel, as time went on, the influence of rational thought, and while he rarely discussed theology, being constitutionally reticent in religion, he gave many evidences in later years that his opinions had undergone somewhat of the common change.

That which is the basis of true religion, however, sense of duty, with him never weakened. His love

for the right was a rock against which temptation of all sorts beat in vain. His judgments were, doubtless, sometimes wrong, but there must be few men in the world with consciences more undefiled than his. One of his most marked characteristics was his love for reading. He was not insensible to human companionship, or the charms of society, but give him a book or a newspaper, and he was always perfectly content to be alone. He was not free from regard for the good opinion of others, but the morbid desire to be conspicuous that characterizes so many, and indeed all purely selfish ambitions, were foreign to his nature. An atmosphere of thought and enquiry, through his influence, pervaded his home, and his children will always remember with pleasure the dignified, clear English, an English formed from intercourse with the best classics of our tongue, that he always spoke and encouraged his family to speak. In early life he was strict, even stern, in discipline, and unable sometimes to enter into his children's younger ways of thought, but there was never a time, when for them, or for his wife, whom he loved with rare devotion, he would not have cut off his right hand, had he felt that their welfare required it. In the

course of years he grew not less but much more sympathetic with ways of thought that differed from his own, and after the death of his wife the mellowing process in his whole nature was so complete that he constantly seemed to grow more true a saint.

The facts of his public life and service are briefly these. Educated at the Cornwallis schools, and at Horton Academy, in his seventeenth year he entered the profession of teaching, and for fourteen years was a highly successful teacher, especially of mathematics and classics. In 1854 he was appointed a Commissioner of Schools, which office he held, except during an interval of three years, for the rest of his life. In 1865 the Government, acting through the Council of Public Instruction, conferred upon him the important office of Inspector of Schools for Kings County, in which he was succeeded by the Rev. Robert Somerville, now of New York, in 1868. At the time of his appointment the Free School Act had just come into force, and his pacific temper and his courteous treatment of the people of the county did much towards allaying the discontent it had aroused.

In 1859 he was appointed a Commissioner in the

Supreme Court of the Province, and in 1870, as his father had been before him, a Justice of the Peace. Sixteen years later, in 1886, the shire town of Kentville, where he had long resided, one of the oldest and most beautiful villages in the Province, was incorporated, and the prominent part he had always taken in its public affairs, and his high standing in the community naturally gave him a place on its first Council Board. Soon after he was asked to accept the responsible position of Clerk and Treasurer of the town, and this double office he held until his death.

In early manhood our father settled in Kentville, where after some years he married Anna Augusta Willoughby Hamilton, his brother John Rufus, also, soon after marrying her sister Josephine.

Our mother was the youngest daughter of Otho and Maria Starr Hamilton; a descendant of one of the well-known branches of the Scottish Hamiltons (her grandfather having been born and educated in Scotland), and of the American Starrs, and DeWolfs; and a near connexion of the Willoughbys. Her family belonged to the Church of England, and she and our father were married by the Rev. John Storrs, father of the present popular Vicar of St.

Peter's, Eaton Square, London, at St. James Church, Kentville, a church identified with much of our family's history in the past and now. On their marriage our parents settled in Kentville, always our mother's home, and gradually our father acquired a valuable property, which he continually more and more sought to improve. Our dear mother was a proud, sensitive woman, of acknowledged beauty, and with a loving, tender heart. She, too, died suddenly, at the early age of fifty-five, on the twenty-third of September, 1883, and not only her sad family circle, but society at large, mourned for her as one of its most useful members. Of our father's relations in the Eaton name were his first cousins the late Colonel Daniel Eaton, of Washington, D. C., the late Mr. George Eaton, of St. John, New Brunswick, Clement Belcher Eaton, of St. Stephen, and Brenton Halliburton Eaton, of Halifax. Other more distant cousins were General John Eaton, of Washington, and Wyatt Eaton, one of the most eminent portrait and figure painters of our day. His nearest relations of other names were among the Blisses, Rands, and Whites. He was connected distantly with both the Bliss families of New Brunswick, to one of which belonged

Chief Justice Jonathan and his son Judge William Blowers Bliss; to the other Judge Daniel and his son Judge John Murray Bliss, and the mother of Sir Lemuel Allan Wilmot.

His White relations were exclusively in the United States, the most eminent of them, perhaps, being the late Mr. Richard Grant White. His children are six, two of them graduates of Harvard, and all holding honorable positions in society. One of his sons is a clergyman of the Episcopal Church in New York, and another a lawyer and prosecuting attorney in the State of Washington. His only daughter is the wife of Mr. George A. Layton, of H. M. Customs in Truro, and his most dearly loved daughter-in-law, the wife of his youngest son, is a daughter of the late Mr. James H. Thorne, of Halifax.

Of our father's last sickness the facts are few. A week before his death he left his office as usual, after a hard day's work, and in the evening was seized with a violent chill which shortly developed into pneumonia. On Wednesday, May third, he died at "Elmwood," the home where the benediction of his presence had so long been felt, and then we began to know how much the people among

whom his life had gone on, valued and loved him. His funeral was the largest and most touching ever known in the county. The schools were closed, the court was suspended, public resolutions were passed, beautiful flowers were sent, and with universal sorrow he was borne to rest. Not the least touching tribute was that paid him by the children of the schools, who went into the woods and with their own hands plucked great quantities of Mayflowers for his casket. With masses of these beautiful native flowers, just then in bloom, his grave in "The Oaks" was lined: and so our father slept.

The order of his funeral was as follows:

THE MAYOR AND TOWN COUNCIL
THE BOARD OF SCHOOL COMMISSIONERS
EX-MAYORS AND EX-COUNCILLORS
TOWN OFFICIALS
OFFICIATING CLERGYMEN
THE BODY
(borne by Ex-officials of the Town)
MOURNERS
A LARGE CONCOURSE OF CITIZENS

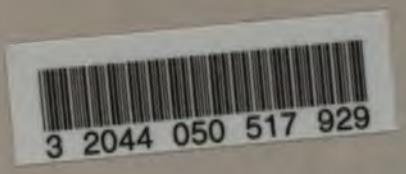
At the gate of the cemetery the Town Council, School Commissioners, and Town Officials, who had

preceded the body divided into two lines, uncovering, as the casket was borne within. Then they solemnly fell behind the bier, and so passed to the grave.

At a public Memorial Service held in Kentville, a few days after our father's death, Judge Chipman, with whom and whose family he had always been on terms of the closest intimacy, said: "In looking back over the past I cannot think of a single instance in which Mr. Eaton failed to exemplify the right. He was a man of sterling character and pure life, doing nothing from selfish motives, but seeking only the highest welfare of the community. I thank God for the noble example he has set us, for the seeds of kindness he scattered by the way, for his gentleness and urbanity, for his unsullied reputation, and his blameless Christian character and life." To such praise as this a newspaper editorial about the same time added: "Mr. Eaton has filled many public positions both provincial and municipal, and in none of these have his probity and integrity ever been questioned."

Since his death a multitude of letters of sympathy have been received by his children, from various parts of the country and from abroad, some of them

most touching in their expressions of love and respect. "He was one of Nature's noblemen," their writers say. "He died as he lived, a Christian gentleman, honored and respected by all." "A better man truly never lived or died. He could not have had one enemy in the whole world."



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